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AUTHOR Gordon, David Paul; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Elementary school students were required to obtain objects from two adults engaged in conversation with each other. Results differed markedly between older and younger children. For the younger children, (1) there were three times as many statement requests (SRs) as interrogative requests (IRs); (2) almost 50% of requests were need statements; (3) only one statement of external motivation occurred; (4) possession and existence questions were rare; and (5) requests consisted of one sentence, single clause utterances. For older children, (1) there were equal numbers of SRs and IRs, (2) fewer than 15% of requests were need statements, (3) external motivation statements were frequent, (4) 50% of IRs were possession or existence questions, and (5) many complex requests of two or more sentences or clauses were produced. The differences were found not to arise because of constraints on grammatical or semantic abilities, but to reflect the child's social knowledge and sense of contextual appropriateness. The dimension of change is not simply marked politeness, but level of social understanding. The changes are discussed by applying the differences to notions of speech act felicity conditions, speech conventions, social concepts of behavioral justification, and the child's view of his/her relation to adults. (Author/JB)

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Children's Requests to Unfamiliar Adults:

Form, Social Function, Age Variation

David Paul Gordon, Nancy Budwig, Amy Strage, Pat Carrell
Institute of Human Learning
University of California, Berkeley

In this paper we will go over material presented in our initial abstract and incorporate updated findings. Our research was carried out with elementary school children, kindergarten through fifth grade. The children took part in an art project under the supervision of an experimenter (E) who sat at a table with them. At first a single child worked alone; a little later a second child came in, was seated opposite the first child, and given a separate art project to work on. The art project required the use of marking pens, two of which were defective. When a child discovered a defective marker and called it to the attention of E, E told the child, "You can get another marker from them", and pointed to a table across the room where two researchers were seated and engaged in conversation. Thus, at this point the child was obliged to approach two unfamiliar adults, interrupt their conversation--or wait until acknowledged--and say something with the intention of obtaining a marking pen. An additional request was elicited from each child at the end of the art project when the child was sent back to the researchers across the room to get a letter for his/her parents.

In this discussion we will be concerned with the forms children used, and why they chose them in speaking to the unfamiliar researchers to get marking pens and letters. Our analyses suggest that somewhere around the third grade children begin to view the social situation established by the experiment differently

from the younger children, and this manifests itself in different forms of expression. In our sample the profiles of requests made by kindergarten through second grade children were similar to each other, but different from the requests made by third through fifth graders, whose requests also tended to show a common profile. Our main initial findings are shown in the conference abstract (attached). Since that time we have tested children in a different school district, of somewhat higher SES, and the following analysis is based on the combined results, although this reduces the clarity of some of the earlier trends. Tables 1 and 2 show how we coded our data and what we found.

Children's utterances were divided into Statement Requests (SR's) and Interrogative Requests (IR's). There were no imperatives. The differences between younger and older children which are apparent in table 2 cannot result from constraints on language in terms of grammatical or semantic competence. Seven year olds--second graders--have mastered all of the grammar necessary for any of the forms used by fifth graders. The basic claim we want to make about the data is that it suggests the older children have a kind of social recognition or sense of social context that the younger children have not yet attained; their sociolinguistic development, here, is a consequence of specific social, not linguistic, achievements.

Surveying the forms used, one might initially say that the older children simply use more polite forms than the younger children do. But in the sense of formal politeness conventions this does not really appear to be the case. For example, the younger children in our sample were as likely to say "please" as the older children--and neither group made frequent use of "please" in any event. The other forms that occurred in our data that may be considered particularly marked for politeness are the permission questions, "May I...?" or "Can I have another marker?" There is little difference between younger and older children

in the use of these forms. Thus, sociolinguistic development here is not a matter of acquiring stereotyped or marked politeness forms of the kind one might imagine a parent explicitly teaching a child to use. If older children are using more polite forms, they are not conventionally fixed politeness formulas.

The concept of politeness we wish to invoke here depends on the older children's social recognition that they may be intruding or imposing on the unfamiliar researchers who they must obtain markers and letters from; they do not automatically treat adults as if it were the adults' role to satisfy the child's needs. Requests which minimize willful imposition or assumptions about compliance will be recognizable as polite. The difference between the social concepts of third through fifth graders and younger children is shown by several aspects of our data. We find that younger children were more likely to make simple Need statements than older children, and were also more likely to make simple Cause statements--although the number of Cause statements was small in any event. The older children were much more likely to make External Motivation statements (e.g. "She said to get a letter for my parents"). In the experimental situation, such statements were appropriate only for requesting the letter to parents. Younger children used them in 4% of such requests, older children used them in 24% of letter requests. This suggests, we believe, that the older child feels some need to justify his/her request for a letter and justifies interrupting and imposing on the two unfamiliar adults by deflecting the intrusion to the account of some external source.

The use of compound utterances provides additional support for the claim that around the third grade children become more aware of the need for dealing with possible intrusion on others and providing justifications. Older children were more likely to produce compound requests of two or more clauses or sentences, and when they did, their utterances showed a quite diverse combination of request

categories. In contrast, all the compound requests of kindergarten through second grade children, with one exception, were formed by using a Need statement in combination with a single additional category, as in "This marker is broken, I need a new marker."

Our claims about sociolinguistic development are reflected in other parts of our data. Older children were more likely than younger children to phrase their requests as questions, and the kind of questions they asked were different. Older children asked almost three times as many Possession/Existence questions ("Do you have...?" "Are there any...?") as younger children; they make up almost 50% of their interrogative requests. Younger children asked relatively many Location questions, which were rare above the second grade. Questions such as "Do you have any markers?" or "Are there any...?" are recognizable as rather polite ways of requesting. But, again, we would hold that these are not stereotyped marked politeness forms of the type that might be explicitly taught. Their force derives from the fact that such questions are non-coercive--they do not assume the hearer has the object or will provide it. On the other hand, the "where" questions of younger children, although they do not in themselves assume compliance, do assume the hearer has the marker and knows the answer, and are recognizably more imposing--they may imply, for example, that given the answer the child will simply take the object sought. This is not to claim the older children must fully recognize the derivation of the forms they use. Only that--or at least that--in hearing different forms used in different circumstances, older children can better recognize the social nuances in a request situation and therefore can better pair appropriate speech forms with those situations.

Another aspect of sociolinguistic development that appears to be involved in our findings is a change in children's conceptions of speech conventions. Older and younger children both use frequent Permission requests ("Can I have...?")

as requests for objects (letters/markers), which are simultaneously requests for action by another. Permission requests are highly conventional forms. One cannot, for example, think of the child literally asking about his/her ability: "Can I have...?". Older children use frequent Possession/Existence questions, which may appear to be conventional in one sense, but nevertheless must generally be used in contexts where they could be meant literally as information questions. One cannot properly ask "Do you have a pencil?" as a request of another person if there is a pencil in plain sight on the desk and it is evident to both speaker and hearer that it must be visible to the speaker. In our experiment, children are told they can get markers from the two researchers, so when they ask if there are any markers, they are not using the question literally--but they are using it as if it were literal. What we are suggesting here is that the older children seem to be developing a more complicated sense of speech convention in which forms may be simultaneously conventional in one respect, but must be used literally in another. Children, then, may learn to use certain non-literal conventional forms early--permission request, for example--and only later learn appropriate use of conventionalized literal forms.

The above discussion may explain, in part, why our older children often added a tag such as "I can use" or "I can borrow" to their "Do you have...?"/"Are there any...?" questions (e.g. "Do you have a blue marker I can use?"). This qualification was not added by a single child under the third grade. Its presence in older children's speech may have reflected the child's wish to make clear that the question was not to be taken literally as a request for information only. Other interpretations, not necessarily conflicting, are possible. In line with our previous discussion of social development, it may be that older children are simply showing their sense of social imposition and are framing their requests in a way that is less directly demanding of the unfamiliar adults since it

doesn't automatically assume the adults will provide markers if they have them. Clearly much more work on children's concepts of conventionality and social imposition needs to be done to answer this and other questions that are raised by our finding that children in grades three through five used different forms from kindergarten through second grade children for making requests to unfamiliar adults, and that these differences resulted from different concepts of social circumstances, speech conventions, and social imposition.

David Paul Gordon, Nancy Budwig, Amy Strage, Pat Carrell:

Children's Requests to Unfamiliar Adults: Form, Social Function, Age Variation

81 elementary students, grades K-5, at middle to upper-middle class public schools, participated in an art project supervised by E_1. During the project subjects were sent to obtain 1) new marking pens to replace broken ones, and, 2) at the conclusion of the project, a letter to parents, from two unfamiliar adults, E_2 and E_3, who were engaged in conversation at a table across the room. The situation required the child to interrupt E_2 and E_3 or wait until acknowledged, and then convey a request for a marking pen or a letter. During the project each subject made from one to three such requests, which were classified as Statement Requests (SR) and Interrogative Requests (IR). There were no Imperative Requests. SR's fell into four subcategories which accounted for 88% of all SR's: Need ("I need..."); Cause ("...is broken/doesn't work."); Elliptical Goal ("The letter."; "A blue marking pen."); External Motivation ("She sent me to..."; "I'm supposed to..."). Over 90% of IR's were accounted for by four categories: Possession ("Do you have...?"); Existence ("Are there any..?"; "Is there ...?"); Permission ("Can/May I have...?"); Location ("Where is the...?"). The distribution of request forms over these categories showed a significant change taking place between the 2nd and 3rd grades in the types of forms used. For K-2 children (N=40):

1) There were almost three times as many SR's as IR's.
2) Almost 50% of all requests were Need statements.
3) Only a single statement of External Motivation occurred.
4) Possession and Existence questions were rare.
5) Almost all requests were carried out in a one sentence, single clause utterance that clearly fell into a single category.

In marked contrast, for children in grades 3-5 (N=41):

6) There were approximately equal numbers of SR's and IR's.
7) Fewer than 15% of requests were Need statements.
8) External Motivation statements were frequent.
9) Many complex requests of two or more sentences or clauses were produced. Multiple clauses tied together SR and IR subcategories, and provided elaborated explanations.
10) 50% of IR's were Possession or Existence questions.

The differences in 1-10 do not arise because of constraints on grammatical or semantic abilities. They reflect the child's social knowledge and sense of contextual appropriateness. The dimension of change is not simply marked politeness. Younger children produce a high number of Need statements. The reduction of these forms in older children is matched by an increase in Possession and Existence questions, which are conventional forms (and are used as such, since our subjects know the answer in advance), but not marked for politeness (as "May I...?" or requests with "please" are). Similarly, our younger subjects were capable of producing utterances of two or more sentences or clauses, but rarely did in this context. Our older subjects who did were being more polite, but not through the use of marked politeness conventions. They were displaying a different level of social understanding. We discuss this change in social understanding through applying the differences in 1-10 to notions of speech act felicity conditions, speech conventions, social concepts of behavioral justification, and the child's view of his/her relation to adults.

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David Paul Gordon, Nancy Budwig, Amy Strage, Pat Carrell
U.C., Berkeley

Table 1
Request Categories

	Category	Example
Statement Requests (SR)	NEED	I need a blue marker.
	CAUSE	The green's broken.
	EXTERNAL MOTIVATION	She told me to get a letter for my parents.
	ELLIPTICAL GOAL	The note.
	OTHER	I'm done.
Interrogative Requests (IR)	PERMISSION	Can I have a blue marker?
	EXISTENCE	Are there any more markers?
	POSSESSION	Do you have a green marker?
	LOCATIVE	Where's the marker?
	OTHER	What letter?
Compound Requests	SR + SR	I need a blue pen. The blue's broken.
	SR + IR	My pen's broken. Do you have another pen?
	IR + IR	Do you have a blue? Where's the blue?

Table 2
Percent of requests in each category across grades

		GRADES K-2 (N=89 requests)		GRADES 3-5 (N=114 requests)	
	Category	% of total	% within SR	% of total	% within SR
Statement Requests (SR)	NEED	42	57	29	48
	CAUSE	10	14	7	12
	EXT. MOTIV.*	3	5	11	19
	ELLIPTICAL GOAL	9	12	11	17
	OTHER	9	12	3	4
		% of total	% within IR	% of total	% within IR
Interrogative Requests (IR)	PERMISSION	16	45	23	42
	EXISTENCE	2	6	8	15
	POSSESSION	7	19	18	32
	LOCATION	9	26	2	3
	OTHER	1	3	4	8
Compound Requests **	SR+SR, SR+IR, ETC.	8	-	14	-

KEY: * External motivation requests occurred only for letters. They represented 4% of K-2 and 24% of 3-5 requests for letters.

** Compound components are also included in tallies of simple SR's & IR's. E.g., "This pen is broken, I need a pen" would be counted as NEED, CAUSE, and COMPOUND (SR + SR). As a result, percentages sum to more than 100%.